

**SOFIA****Time to update the EU's anti-corruption tactics****By Ruslan Stefanov of the Center for the Study of Democracy**

More than a year after joining the European Union, Bulgaria is still being accused of poor governance and a failure to tackle corruption and organised crime. These charges follow more than a decade of effort, monitoring, capacity-building and complaints – along with tens of millions of euros spent in pre-accession finance. It is high time that the EU and Bulgaria adopted a new approach.

A good starting point would be for Brussels to accept that its current system of monitoring the performance of individual member states is out of date. It needs replacing with a pan-European

set of standards in good governance which can be used as a benchmark to guide policy actions across the Union. That way, the Commission would avoid accusations of double standards and Bulgaria could make sure that necessary steps are taken. Everyone would know that if something gets measured, remedial action is taken.

Good governance and anti-corruption are not the *terra*

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*incognita* of 20 years ago. Now they are well-defined and widely-studied, the subject of private sector concern and mainstream policymaking around the world. It is time that the EU recognises this trend as it prepares to update its own anti-corruption policy

this year. The European Commission needs to adopt a common approach to good governance and corruption, produce and implement guidelines and apply minimum standards to all member states. Otherwise, the benefits of the internal market – even the union itself – will remain constrained and distorted by different national practices.

Unfortunately, Sofia's experience illustrates just how slowly the EU is moving in the desired direction. When Bulgaria began EU entry talks, Commission reports relied on "persisting rumours" about corruption and organised crime. Brussels then progressed towards using reliable national and international sources for measuring levels of corruption. Finally, after Bulgaria's accession in 2007, the Commission introduced its own mechanism for "benchmarking" cooperation and

verification of progress in the areas of judicial reform and the fight against corruption and organised crime.

However, this mechanism only allows the Commission to evaluate Bulgaria's progress over time. There is no "baseline" of expected standards nor can one country's performance be compared with another's. In fact, although Bulgaria has come under the EU spotlight, authoritative sources such as the European Victimisation

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Survey, Transparency International and the World Bank all show that Bulgaria is not alone. A number of member states face similar or even bigger problems with corruption. This is often rightly interpreted as the Commission applying double standards.

The Commission's present system can – and should – be expanded to lay

the foundations for a state-of-the-art policy of corruption monitoring and benchmarking, one which establishes a baseline for good governance throughout the EU. Its introduction might be politically difficult, but a new and improved system would have many benefits. It would allow the EU (and others) to increase the leverage available from the vast sums it spends on development assistance. EU aid would be dependent upon recipients achieving minimum good governance standards, just like the US already demands. It would also help to remove anxiety about Europe's double standards. And it would provide tax payers with an easy-to-understand method of measuring value-for-money where EU anti-corruption spending is concerned.

Such targeted methods do work. One clear example is Bulgaria's illegal duty-free trade across its external EU land border. Once the Commission gave Sofia a clear indication that smuggling through duty-free outlets was a specific problem, the Bulgarian authorities closed down the

trade – albeit after a lot of soul searching and hand wringing. Now the EU and Bulgaria need to scale up this sort of cooperation.

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The political stakes are potentially high. European and Bulgarian parliamentary elections are scheduled for 2009 and both the Bulgarian government and the Commission need to show voters that they can deliver on their promises to fight corruption and organised crime. Otherwise, they risk facing more and more slaps in the face like the Irish "no" to the Lisbon treaty and the French and Dutch rejections of the draft constitution. As the world economy turns sour, it may take bolder and more innovative policy actions to persuade voters that it is worth their while to support the EU. □

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